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# THE MEXICAN AS HE IS

BY CARLETON BEALS

“FRIENDS, let us follow the cross; and if we have faith we shall conquer.”

Such was the motto of the black and crimson banner, emblazoned with the cross and the coat of arms of Carlos Quinto, King of Spain, which Cortez and his little band of five hundred soldiers planted upon the ramparts of Chapultepec Palace in the capital of the mighty Aztec Empire. That hour began the domination in Mexico of the Roman-Spanish Church and State, and the decadence of all that was great and good in native Indian civilization. That hour came into being in Mexico “the red man’s burden,” a burden which has become heavier during the many centuries of foreign occupation, foreign intrigue, and devastating civil wars.

Ultimately the future of Mexico will depend upon the future of that eighty-five per cent of the population that can neither read nor write; of that thirty-eight per cent of pure Indian population, 2,000,000 of which cannot even understand Spanish; and the almost fifty per cent of mestizos with mixed Indian and foreign blood. The solution of “the Mexican problem” must include the regeneration of this great mass of ignorant, starving and disintegrated humanity.

The Mexican is a composite of Indian, Oriental and White: small-boned, spare-limbed, short of stature,—rarely more than five feet six,—with straight black hair, round face, prominent cheek bones, black or deep brown eyes, and a stringy moustache drooping over a somewhat sad, sensitive, full-lipped mouth and weak chin. He is furtive, evasive, distrustful, especially before a person of the higher class or a foreigner; but warm-hearted, impulsive, expansive, and childishly generous if he finds that such a person is *simpático*.

His dress is a synthesis of the Spanish and Indian. He wears a Brobdingnagian sombrero as broad as a baobab tree, on the brim

of which he carries his immediate necessities and more treasured worldly possessions. This hat he will have if he has to pay twenty or thirty pesos, wear *huaraches* or sandals, and go hungry. Next in importance are his tight-fitting trousers, preferably of leather, otherwise of cotton. How he gets them on or off is a mystery. The chances are that they stay cleaved to his body until necessity requires their replacement.

To this general make-up is always added a touch of color by a bright kerchief triangled about the neck, and a flaming red serape flung across the shoulder—one of the most picturesque ensembles to be found among the world's costumes.

The poorer women of Mexico are rarely decently clad; their cotton dresses are ragged and dirty. Black is the color affected, accentuating the sorrow of the land in which they live. Even their scarfs or *tapalos* are black, although one occasionally sees a dull blue or brown *rebozo*. Generally they plod along barefooted and dejected. Always the best goes to her "man," her husband, her lord, her master.

The dress of the Mexican is a reflection of his economic status. Under the various régimes that have so quickly "flourished and faded" in Mexico, the peón has discovered that he can live as comfortably in idleness as by toiling long, soul-deadening hours. He will be as likely to be hungry and in rags when he labors as when he does not. He is not the first in the world to have discovered that fact, and in his case it is a happy discovery in that it corresponds to his racial temperament.

For from ten to fifteen hours of work he would earn under the Díaz régime about fifteen cents. When I left Mexico some months ago, the laborers in the government parks received but seventy-five cents a day; less than the fifteen cents in the time of Díaz, for the prices are as high in Mexico as in the United States, if not higher. With good luck a Mexican can steal as much as that in a day, and certainly can make as much peddling fruit or papers. Even trade workers, such as painters, carpenters, etc., receive but a dollar and a half a day. I talked with a *cargador*, who for twenty-five cents had carried my two-hundred pound trunk on his back some twenty city blocks, asking him how he found life. He told me he had been a tailor under the Díaz

régime, but that he could make more now, carrying such heavy loads, than at his trade. The bakers work fourteen hours, although the Constitution says that night workers shall work only seven hours, and receive but seventy-five cents to a dollar a day. Girls in cafés have told me that they work from fourteen to seventeen hours a day and receive but the equivalent of \$7.50 a month. Knowing these conditions, one has more respect for the lazy man and the bandit—they are both economic products.

And yet, where the peón has a patch of ground to call his own,—and that is all he asks,—he becomes a hard worker. Wherever I have traveled among the people of Mexico who have their own lands to till, I have always witnessed the greatest industry. The husbandman is off before daybreak, takes his meal of cold tortillas and cheese in the fields, and does not return until long after sundown.

The home of the Mexican, where such economic standards are the rule, can readily be imagined. Usually but one room for an immense brood of dirty, half-naked children—a dark, windowless, unfloored, damp room, where one or two faded prints of the Virgin and the Christ are usually the only decorations. The furniture consists of a few broken stools, a rickety table, some home-woven mats for beds, and blocks of wood for pillows—nothing more. For dishes, a few crudely-made earthen bowls and pitchers; for cooking, a tin charcoal brazier, and its inevitable partner, the stone *metate* for pounding out the maize. Food and bones are thrown on the floor to the mangy, flea-bitten dogs; the place is infested with lice and rodents; and disease reaches out its scrawny hand of death from every corner.

His diet is a starvation diet, the diet of his Indian ancestors before him, but less in quantity: corn *tortillas*, flat, unsalted cakes of half-baked, mashed corn; *frijoles*, or Mexican beans; and *pulque*, the drink given to him by his ancient Indian gods. This is his diet, meal in and meal out, year in and year out. Occasionally he has a cup of coffee, usually without milk or sugar; occasionally he substitutes, if he is in the country, meat or cheese for the *frijoles*. The amounts of each are insufficient. The Mexican is chronically underfed, chronically suffering from malnutrition, and constantly the prey of disease. The death rate of Mexico

City, climatically the healthiest spot to be found anywhere, is 42 per thousand, the highest in any large city in the world.

His family life, however, is usually happy—perhaps because of its care-free and irresponsible hand-to-mouth character. Yet his wife is virtually his slave. She must do his bidding without question, and she prides herself on her submissiveness and subjection. He may curse her, beat her, have open relations with three or four other women, and she not only has no legal redress, but would not for a moment think of seeking any. The marriage tie, at best, is loose; few peóns ever have enough money to pay for a wedding ceremony. Getting married is living together, and is quite the moral thing to do. Yet the man may leave his wife in the lurch with half a dozen children, and return after many years of absence, and she will take him unquestioningly back to her heart! She has no independence and no importance, except to serve as man's slave and minister to his desires.

Thus the Mexican peón's life, aside from the bare facts of animal existence, is limited. Yet his few moments of relaxation, his amusements, are important factors in determining his character and outlook upon the world.

In a great measure, the spiritual, social, and recreational life of the peón revolves about the church. Nearly all his holidays are church *fiestas*. These hark back to the old Church holy days of feasting and jollity.

On such a day, José goes first to mass, wedging his way in with a huge, eager, ragamuffin throng. If it is Guadalupe day, the day of the Virgin of Mexico, the roads for miles will be converted into endless rivers of bobbing sombreros. From every side pour in the crowds of rollicking peasants, some on burro-back, some on foot, some on their knees; all converging towards Guadalupe, the religious Mecca of the country, hurrying to the lofty cathedral that pierces the tropic, turquoise sky above the green, mountain-rimmed bowl of the Valley of Mexico.

Once inside the cathedral, our José faces the symbols of Aztec glory and Spanish power, for the Church of Mexico is a synthesis of both. The stone arches swell to majestic height above the massive columns, impressing the poor peón with his insignificance and impotence, and the awfulness of God. In the dim light the

solid gold and silver balustrades and glistening chandeliers gleam with a heavy, barbaric splendor; great dull copper tablets engraved with Bible verses line the walls; old saints peer down with a sad, paternal look from rich, faded paintings. About a Mexican cathedral one senses a certain Oriental richness and mysticism, a certain Egyptian massiveness.

Before the awe of the greatest Church of the world, and the grandeur and grotesqueness of its Aztec antecedents, poor, torn José cringes, with a shaking taper, on his knees before the gorgeousness of the high-flung altar. With real and honest worship he watches the tall, but fat, heavy-set, big-jowled priest, in his robes of ermine and purple velvet, pass among his tatterdemalion fellows, collecting hand-kisses and pennies; past a poor woman who, without the least sense of embarrassment, nurses her babe at her naked breast; past the boy who munches peanuts as religiously as he recites his prayers; past the great unwashed that knows more of catechism than of soap.

With the drone of the chants, the swelling tones of the full-voiced organ, the sonorous surge of the litany, the peón's emotion masters him, and he bursts into tears. Finally he places his taper beneath his favorite saint, drops two or three days' wages into the pittance-box, and passes with his shaken soul into the sunlight of God.

Outside he thrusts his way through the rotting, blear-eyed beggars, and past the hundreds of clamoring street-venders. A new feeling possesses him—he sheds his emotions easily. The rest of the day is for pleasure.

Most conspicuous are the gambling joints. They announce their presence garishly to eye and ear. From their interiors bursts the rollicking thrum of marimbas. Within may be discovered any number of skin-game contrivances, arranged to appeal to the imagination and the deep-rooted gambling instincts of the Mexican. In such a place, José will spend the remainder of the morning, feverishly watching the ebb and flow of his coppers.

At noon he will probably buy his dinner from one of the tag-rag women, squatting by the curb, cooking over a low charcoal fire, her hands and arms streaked with soot and dripping with yellow grease. Crouching down in the gutter, his back to the swirling

eddies of dust, a little earthenware bowl of *frijoles* or some greasy, brick-colored stew, he hastily devours the contents with the aid of a corn *tortilla*, fashioned in the shape of a trowel.

In some *pulquería*, some festively painted saloon, bearing the name of "The Dance of the Gipsies," or "The Promenade of Venus," he will take his place in the midst of the hilarious throng of men, women and children, happy and dirty. Here José will dance and play the afternoon away over a floor slippery-wet with spilled *pulque* in an atmosphere sweetishly sickening from its stale smell, heavy with tobacco smoke, and foul with vile talk. As the day lengthens into night the fun grows more hilarious, the licentiousness more unrestrained, and then the drinks go around faster. And our José drinks; drinks until he has absorbed his share of the 375,000 litres of *pulque* that are sold on just an ordinary day in the Mexican capital; drinks until he can assure himself that all's well with the world.

On another day, however, he will probably attend a bull-fight, where he will witness three or four horses gutted and a bull baited into madness and rage. You will hear him shout: "*Que bonia!*"—"How fine!"—or "*Mire, mire!*"—"Look, look!"—at each most bloody lunge of the horns or the matador's blade. Indeed killing in its various manifestations must be enumerated among the Mexican's amusements—or at least the telling of killings. Start any Mexican upon such a theme and you will soon become convinced that somewhere he has a private graveyard of dead enemies. For there is a bloodthirstiness about the enjoyments of all classes, a delight in the over-sensuality of emotions—a heritage from Spaniard and Aztec.

The Aztecs and other tribes had their bloody, religious human sacrifices, sacrifices witnessed by tens of thousands of frenzied people. One need but recall the terrible sacrifice that took place during the reign of Ahuizotl at the completion of the lofty teocalli of Mexico City. At the first streaks of dawn a long, sacerdotal procession wound slowly, and in state, up and up the steep sides of the temple to the huge sacrificial stone, a mammoth convex block of jasper, where six priests with long matted locks, flowing Medusa-like over their black, hieroglyphic-covered robes, awaited the wretched victims. One by one these were

sacrificed before the eyes of the breathless multitude below. Five priests held the head and limbs, while the sixth, clad in a blood-red cape, slit open the breast with a sharp razor of *itzli*, a flint-like lava, and, thrusting his hand into the body, tore out the palpitating heart. With a mighty gesture it was held up towards the sun, and then flung smoking at the feet of the terrible war-god, Huitzilopochtli, whose repulsive shape towered above the prostrated masses. Every day until dark, for four long days, every day until priests and the stones on which they stood were reeking with blood, the sacrifice continued. The Spanish abolished these practices, but replaced them with massacre, inquisition, and bull-fights. Thus Mexican bloodthirstiness is the product of Aztec and Spanish character.

Yet the Mexican is fundamentally a weak, inoffensive person. This is one of the contradictory traits of his inexplicable character. His cruelty, his love of violence, flashes up, like powder in a pan, as an atavistic trait, in reaction to his continued passivity during hundreds of years of oppression and tame submission. In most parts of Mexico, depending upon the race and historic circumstances, this cruelty and bloodthirstiness is not an integral part of the Mexican's character. Far more pronounced is his air of long-suffering endurance, his meek, furtive aspect, as he apologetically treads the plains of his ancient patrimony, his ancient empire, his Mexico.

This then is the Mexican lower class at work, in its homes, in its temples, and at play. The picture is not a pleasant one, but is at no point overdrawn. José has inherited most of the evil traits of two races, and few of the better traits except in a latent form.

These last, in spite of the Mexican's historic degradation, in spite of his ignorance, his terribly low economic standards of living, still find chance expression, and are the most admirable traits of man. At present he is a child in thought and action, a savage in civilization; but though he may never respond to the slogan of efficiency, his southern emotionalism, romanticism, and sensuousness can be turned into good channels just as readily as they can be perverted. That his temperament has produced strong leaders, thinkers and artists, has already been proved in the history of the world and his own country; but it will rarely produce them under



a system of exploitation that degrades the individual and harshens his life until it issues forth in deeds of moral perversion.

But in spite of all, the Mexican has a love of poetry and a love of music that ought to be the envy of the average American. He has an abiding, almost religious sense of beauty. However humble his circumstances he will try to find room for a few flowering plants, even if he has to build a garden in the air. Traveling the full length of the Tamazula River, I saw, along its rocky banks, at nearly every peasant's door a rude flower-box, elevated on stilts to prevent its destruction by stray pigs and chickens. These poor peasants had gone to this effort although they had to eke out a starvation existence by cultivating corn on the sides of mountains so steep that they have been known to fall off into the valley below. The Mexican has a deep love for color. I once heard a little bare-foot Indian girl speak of the colors she liked best. It was a treat to watch her enraptured face as she rolled the words, "*azul, azul, azul,*" lispingly over her tongue in luscious memory of some shade of blue that had taken her fancy.

Above all the Mexican is generous, and he is very sympathetic. Where an out-of-the-way village still retains its early Indian customs and still possesses its *ejidos* or commons, you find the people industrious, as I have said, but also careful and thoughtful, ingenious, and of true coöperative spirit. What one *vecino* has, the other shares. No man goes hungry, no man lords it over the others. This trait of generosity is widespread. I have seen a poor, tattered soldier, earning sixty cents a day, out of which sum he had to feed himself and perhaps wife and children, give a shivering old woman ten *centavos* with which to buy coffee. These are the nobler human virtues.

The Mexican, peón or aristocrat, is invariably courteous and gentle, especially to strangers and foreigners. Once sitting in the plaza of a small mountain town, I was honored by the leading citizen coming forth to offer his assistance, his house, and fund of local information—because I was a stranger. Passing villagers stopped and asked me from whence I came, where I was going, how long I intended to remain in town, and always their questions were accompanied by an offer of friendship and assistance,

an invitation to a meal, a proffer of a cigarette, a flower, or an orange—because I was a stranger in their midst.

But people that are starving, people that are broken by war, cannot continue to love poetry, to love music, to love beauty; they cannot continue to be generous, courteous, sympathetic or loyal. Yet somehow the nobler traits of the Mexican José must be salvaged, redirected and made a creative power for the rescue of himself and his country. His future is the future of Mexico—that richest, most gorgeous, most charming and colorful land of time, wrapped in the romance of tears, of history, of the South; to-day, brooding Sphinx-like, lazily . . . dreamily . . . hopefully . . . beneath its clear, tropic skies; tomorrow, flaming with strife and discord, its whole national life swept into the maelstrom of armed conflict, of galloping cavalry, of bivouac and battlement. Yet even the maelstrom is picturesque, even the Zapatistas clatter into the capital with flowers on their guns!

But picturesqueness, dreams, hopes, are not bread; nor are these, or armed revolution, remedies for alleviating the misery of the peón; for ending his centuries of abasement; for elevating his social and economic standards to the level of those of the civilized nations.

CARLETON BEALS.